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TAGS: ECON EAGR ETRD SENV SOCI TBIO VM
SUBJECT: DELTA MEKONG CLIMATE CHANGE FORUM A GOOD START, BUT JUST THE BEGINNING

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The First Mekong Delta Climate Change Forum brought experts, government officials, donors and organizations under one roof and spurred debate about climate change issues in Vietnam. The Mekong Delta is particularly at risk to rising sea levels, increased salinity intrusion, and extreme weather patterns, as well as other imminent environmental issues such as hydropower dams upstream on the Mekong River and industrial waste. Provincial authorities are starting to implement the national government's plan to address mitigation and adaptation measures but to translate that will into action, the Mekong Delta still needs comprehensive research coordination, more funding, proper planning and effective management. The renewed cooperation of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) with the Delta Research and Global Observation Network (DRAGON) Institute at Can Tho University as well as other U.S. technical and financial assistance will provide critical support to Vietnam's efforts. End Summary.

Mekong Delta is Among World's Most at Risk Ecosystems

¶2. (SBU) Projected rising sea levels will have near catastrophic consequences for the nearly 20 million (22 percent of Vietnam's population) that live in the Mekong Delta, domestic and international researchers argued at the November 12-13 Vietnam Climate Change Conference in Can Tho city. According to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE)'s estimates, a one meter sea level rise would submerge over one third of the Mekong Delta, affecting 50 percent of Vietnam's rice production and almost all of its rice exports, 60 percent of its aquaculture, and 80 percent of the fruit crop. Researchers noted that the delta's water level rise is expected to be twice the level of sea level rise due to several factors, including prevailing winds and equator spin. A Can Tho University researcher warned that changing weather patterns have also deepened and lengthened flooding in the rainy season, while producing more extreme droughts in the dry season.

¶3. (SBU) As less water flows down the Mekong river from Cambodia, salt water intrusion will render much of the Mekong Delta unusable for agriculture. According to Dr. Ky Quang Vinh, Director of the Natural Resources and Environmental Monitoring Center in the Mekong Delta's largest city of Can Tho, five years ago salt water encroached as far as 70km (42 miles) up the

Mekong river; however, since then due to the easterly winds, salt water intrusion has come primarily from the Phu Quoc Bay, destroying rice crops in An Giang, the province with the delta's largest output. Dr. Vinh noted that while the sea water level has increased by 20 centimeters over the past 10 years, the peak water mark measuring Mekong River flows into Vietnam has fallen from 4.5 to 3.5 meters, and annual rainfall had also dropped by 200 millimeters in the same period. Less fresh water quickly translates into increasing acid surface water in rice paddies and declining yields, agronomists pointed out.

Senior Leadership Waking to the Threat

¶4. (U) In the face of this challenge, Vietnam's top leadership has begun to take notice. The fact that the Chairman of the Office of Government Nguyen Xuan Phuc and the Minister of MONRE Pham Khoi Nguyen attended the conference, as well as Mekong Delta top environment and agriculture officials, demonstrates GVN's increasing climate change awareness and political will to address the issue. Many provincial authorities spoke very generally about climate change and did not appear to have sophisticated understanding of the complexities involved. ConGen Staff also spoke to a representative of the Communist Party's mass mobilization apparatus, the Vietnam Fatherland Front, who said she hopes to spread and raise climate change awareness with farmers at the grassroots level. Conference organizers MONRE pointed out in the closing remarks that the room was still packed at the end of the conference, a rarity at conferences in Vietnam, denoting the high interest and stakes GVN and international participants have in the issue.

Data and Dikes Show Vietnam Has a Long Way to Go

¶5. (SBU) Consistent data is hard to come by in Vietnam, despite the fact that the World Bank tracks 272 projects on climate change mitigation/adaptation currently planned or underway in

Vietnam; many are in the assessment stage. Statistics in the various presentations were sometimes conflicting. Provincial officials like Mr. Ha Ngoc Chau from the HCMC Climate Change Task Force called for better access to data and coordination of research efforts, complaining that his department has difficulty getting research data from MONRE. Both ADB Country Director Ayumi Konishi and MONRE Minister Nguyen argued "not enough research" should not be a substitute for concrete action.

¶6. (SBU) For most officials, "concrete action" apparently meant planning and building dikes to tackle climate change. When designed and constructed properly, dikes can reduce salinity in incoming surface water, however, they are extremely costly and only one small measure against the problem, particularly because they do not prevent salinity from penetrating groundwater sources. In response, researchers stressed that action plans must be appropriate to the intricacies of each province, which can vary substantially in terms of topography, tidal waves and productive activities. The ability of provincial authorities to effectively implement and manage climate change programs is still questionable. According to Germany's GTZ Project Manager, Klaus Schmitt, many of the sea dikes that have already been constructed in Soc Trang province were done so poorly that they actually have caused more damage than they've prevented.

A Convenient Way to Shift Blame

¶7. (SBU) Another potential concern is that GVN officials may use climate change as a scapegoat for issues that are only marginally related. In her presentation, a Ministry of Health official attributed several public health diseases, including A/H1N1 virus, as "caused by climate change." Similarly, climate change may be used as a substitute for manager accountability. For example, after media criticized Ba Ha hydropower plant in Phu Yen province for discharging high water levels without warning in the midst of Typhoon Miranae, Deputy Prime Minister Hoang Trung Hai dismissed the situation as being a result of climate change, in effect shutting off a line of inquiry as to

whether human error or lack of GVN coordination may have also been responsible.

¶8. (SBU) Also, MONRE Minister Nguyen aggressively questioned World Bank and ADB representatives at the forum, challenging them to take a stance in the debate between greenhouse gas emitting countries and the "victims of climate change", including Vietnam, in the upcoming Copenhagen Climate Change Summit. (Note: Vietnam's GHG emissions have grown at the fastest rate in the world over the past decade. It won't be long before Vietnam is considered an emitting country.)

U.S. Assistance to Vietnam on Climate Change Issues

¶9. (SBU) The U.S. Geological Survey will work through the Delta Research and Global Observation Network (DRAGON) to cooperate on environmental and climate change issues and will joint-sponsor a four day conference next month in Can Tho to initiate "Forecast Mekong", a predictive modeling tool to illustrate the impact of climate change on the lower Mekong Basin. In addition, two USAID Regional Development Mission of Asia assessment teams recently traveled to HCMC and Can Tho to look at climate change and food security issues. Further financial and technical assistance to support implementation of Vietnam's National Target Plan and other climate change initiatives in the Mekong Delta could make a significant impact.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) This conference was originally scheduled for October for a couple dozen officials, but MONRE was overwhelmed by domestic and international demand that outstripped its resources and planning ability. To its credit, the organizers regrouped and stepped back up, hosting two hundred diverging and often contradictory viewpoints. The threat climate change poses to the Mekong Delta obviously goes well beyond the environment, to include food and water security, the economy, migration, public health, and national security. Because Vietnam lacks a comprehensive scientific research basis, fragmented local research efforts cannot be integrated and well coordinated on the regional level. GVN and donors alike recognize the need for

more coordination in order to reduce duplication and maximize effectiveness of adaptation and mitigation efforts. While climate change issues are important over the long term, other environmental threats, including discharges of industrial wastes and the effects of upstream hydropower development on Mekong River, some of which are being built by Vietnamese investors in Laos and Cambodia, were scarcely mentioned and will also require attention for limited resources. End comment.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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